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U.S. Airlift Of Falashas 'Quick, Quiet' Search Turned Up Fewer Refugees

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KHARTOUM, Sudan—The U.S. operation that airlifted about 500 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan Friday is now believed to have removed virtually all members of the refugee group from Sudan, according to reliable sources.

In the days before the airlift took place in a precise, three-hour operation on a dusty airstrip near the town of Gedaref, a quiet but diligent search was made of all the refugee camps in eastern Sudan, where the Ethiopian Jews, known as Falashas, were likely to be found.

Five Falashas were located at a camp called Um Rakoba, about 40 miles inside the Sudanese border, a refugee camp where almost 1,200 Falashas died last summer after they had trekked out of their homelands in Gondar Province in Ethiopia, fleeing famine.

The five Falashas were moved quickly to Tawawa refugee camp outside Gedaref, where refugee experts had assumed that about 900 Falashas were living.

In November, December and January, about 7,800 Falashas were moved from Tawawa and sent to Israel in secret flights from Khartoum. That airlift, called "Operation Moses," ended two days after news of the airlift leaked in Israel.

When "Operation Moses" was halted—at the insistence of the Sudanese—it was believed that about 900 Falashas were left behind, but when they were counted in preparation for the operation last Friday, only about 500 were found.

Consideration reportedly was given to delaying the operation for

one week, but the decision to go ahead was made when no one could guarantee that any more Falashas could be located in Sudan.

Then, Thursday night, they were quietly moved from Tawawa under the cover of darkness and carried in "souk lorries," trucks locally hired for the job, to the airstrip, about six miles away. The Falashas were separated into groups and spent the night camped by the rough runway.

Six propeller-driven Air Force C130 Hercules transport planes, painted in desert camouflage colors, flew from Frankfurt, West Germany, to carry the Falashas out. It was reported last week that the refugees were flown to Israel.

The planes, it was learned, landed on the strip one at a time beginning at 5:55 a.m. and, with their engines still running, loaded the Falashas in groups of about 80, and were airborne again within 20 minutes.

The operation proceeded without a hitch, although high winds in the hours before dawn threatened to cancel the airlift. But by then, the sources said, the planes were already under way, and, as first light broke over the flat, sunscorched landscape, the winds abated, and the first plane touched down. The last of the six planes had loaded and taken off by about 9 a.m.

The Central Intelligence Agency planned and ran the operation after discussions March 7 between Sudanese President Jaafar Nimeri and Vice President Bush, sources said. In the aftermath of "Operation Moses," Nimeri had said he had no objection to refugees leaving Sudan, provided they did not go to Israel. Sudan, a member of the Arab League, has no relations with the Jewish state. Unlike "Operation Moses," an extended effort involving 36 flights spread over seven weeks, the guideline for the final evacuation was "quick and quiet."

While most of the world might applaud Sudanese generosity in housing refugees, the Sudanese government is concerned over reaction to the airlift from more radical Arab states. Sudan, a close ally of the United States and Egypt, finds the situation extremely delicate.